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ABSTRACT

Single-sex adventure education programs for adolescent women give them space to challenge traditional feminine roles, relate to other women without the pressures of mixed-sex groups, and examine issues such as personal relationships and health within a safe environment. If there are insufficient women facilitators, male staff should have awareness training to enable them to work sensitively with young women. Starting programs at a low skill level enables participants to visibly achieve, have fun, establish ground rules, and get to know each other and the facilitator. The primary focus is not necessarily the acquisition of activity skills, but rather the personal development acquired through participation in the activity. Because changes in personal development, assertiveness, and self-esteem are difficult to quantify, monitoring and evaluation are crucial. This can best be achieved by negotiating the program's aims and learning outcomes with participants. Initial goals should be simple enough to ensure that the young women experience success. Once success has been achieved, the aims can be renegotiated and developed, and feeling more empowered, the young women may ultimately be able to make significant life-changing choices. Whether positive outcomes are transferred to other areas of the young women's lives depends on the sensitivity and abilities of the facilitator. A 12-week adventure project for young women, funded by an English local education authority, provides examples of these points. (TD)

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by
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RC 023879

Abi Baker-Graham

Work with Girls and Young Women

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of outdoor education activities with girls and young women as a means of personal development and to determine what, if any, advantages there may be from this mode of intervention. I shall draw on my experiences of work in this area specifically with young women, although some of the arguments may be transferable to mixed sex groups.

As a person committed to working with outdoor education activities and young people for over eight years, I have worked with a wide range of individuals and groups of differing abilities, ages and motivation. I intend to focus my experience with one group of young women in order to illustrate how outdoor activities may be effective in work with young women.

Why segregate boys and girls?

When considering opting for single sex groups it is crucial to examine carefully the factors affecting this decision. If the aims for work with young women, or indeed young men, are not made clear, it will be difficult to justify this decision to the young people and outside agencies. Consequently, I hope to explain my motivation for this work through this paper.

The majority of young women with whom I have worked in the 12 - 16 age group appear to have internalised a 'secondary citizen' complex. That is they appear to have assumed notions of inferior ability and worth, which is neither deliberate nor, in most cases, recognised. Furthermore, in my experience, when the sexes are together in a group, stereotypical roles are reinforced - the young women are loathed to look 'silly' in front of the boys and are more comfortable playing a supportive and nurturing role. When segregated, young women no longer have established roles to conform to. As stereotypes are explored the young women may well feel uncomfortable as they search for a new self-created role within the group. Within this context young women have space to loose inhibitions and may begin to challenge traditional feminine roles.

This can be disorientating, as it may be their first experience of a women-only space. It should be remembered that girls often develop their identity as a woman not through individual endeavours to grow but through their relationships with men and boys (see Scraton 1992). As well as an opportunity to try whatever activities are planned, the young women are given the opportunity to relate to other women without the pressures associated with mixed sex groups. For as boys may try to appear more macho, young women may feel they have to appear attractive to the boys. This can often be difficult when they have a harness and helmet on ready for a climbing session! However, research suggests that this very situation in mixed sexed groups, together with particular teaching approaches and in certain situations appears to

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challenge traditional stereotypical views of both girls and boys. Boys appeared to recognise and acknowledge not only their emotional side but also girl's abilities (see Humberstone 1990). Whilst girls gained self-confidence and saw another more sensitive side to boys (see Humberstone 1986).

Nevertheless, single sex groups provide scope for work that may not be possible within situations where boys are present (see Spratt, McCormack and Collins 1998). Issues pertinent to young women such as those concerning personal relationships and health, within a 'safe' environment can more easily be addressed. But more importantly, in my view, young women have the opportunity for discovery and re-motivation, free from barriers frequently encountered in much mixed sex groups.

Staffing

Like a number of other women workers (Collins 1998; Spratt et al. 1998), I support the requirement for women facilitators of these women-only groups in the outdoors. But there certainly is the need for positive male role models who can demonstrate sensitivity and are concerned to challenge traditional macho approaches. Furthermore, resources may be such that there are insufficient women workers and so male staff may be required to work with the young women. In such cases it is vitally important that these men have awareness training to enable them to work sensitively with young women.

The group

The group of young women used to illustrate my argument are ten 14 / 15 year olds. A teacher at their school selected them as requiring development in assertiveness skills. Some were victims of bullying and so were not attending school. Some were involved with substance abuse and petty crime. Outdoor activities were new to them all.

Why Outdoor Education Activities?

I refer to the term outdoor education in preference to the traditional concept of outdoor pursuits, as I believe the primary focus must be with the learning and not the activity. Arguably, the desired outcome is not necessarily the acquisition of the skills related to an activity, but instead the personal development acquired through participation in the activity. Thus it is not reaching the top of say a climb that is important but what is learnt on the way up! Thus the activities that form the vehicle for my work are climbing, abseiling, canoeing, sailing, caving, mountain biking, fell-walking, in addition to initiative and group challenges.

The outdoors has traditionally been male dominated. The image frequently conveyed by the media is one of macho activities or conquests of various wildernesses and great mountain peaks! Women's involvement has gradually become more recognised and many are now widely acknowledged as professionals and experts in their own

right. Douglas (1998) identifies the considerable changes that have occurred since the early '80s in both women climbers' perceptions of themselves and in some of the views of them by male climbers. Women who appear to succeed in the outdoors may become positive role models - believable, real and inspiring.

As a woman participating and leading groups in outdoor activities, there still seems to be more pressure to prove leadership competences and skills than for men (see Allin 1998).

A woman leader is still an unusual sight. Frequently, in both mixed or single sex groups, I am asked where the leader is. Or if I am with a male colleague, he is assumed to be the qualified instructor and, at first, group members seem to prefer to take their lead from him. The mostly unspoken hesitancies of groups in seeing a woman in a non-traditional role is an issue that should be addressed - such prejudice may be at the root of wrongly assumed roles and abilities of both sexes. However, this sort of situation does provide a very good opportunity for traditional gender roles and assumptions to be challenged and changed. Once a group sees a confident and competent woman leading a potentially hazardous activity and recognises that she is their lead and example, they are forced to question any preconceived images they may have brought, perhaps subconsciously, with them and are faced with a tangible conflict of roles and abilities.

Outdoor education therefore offers the opportunity for young women to participate in what has been a male dominated arena. If a woman leads a group of young women there is a unique chance to combine exciting activities within a safe sisterhood environment. This combination can, and often does, encourage mutual support, admiration and camaraderie that may be difficult to develop as spontaneously through more usual types of work with girls.

Evaluation

As well as anecdotal evidence, it is important that formal evaluative processes are in place to assess the progress of the young women and the group. These developments can only be measured by effective and continuous monitoring of the aims and learning outcomes that have been already negotiated between the facilitator and the young women. I explain this to the groups that I facilitate by saying that if they do not know where they want to go, they will not know if or when they have arrived. This is extremely important if we want young people to make sense of, and learn from, their experiences. In this way they have a feeling of control over and commitment in their experiences and consequently become more empowered.

The project

The example described here is of a Local Education Authority (LEA) funded 12-week project. A week of basic 'fun' activities was initially set up for the group to enable the young women to get to know each other and myself, to establish ground rules and to

negotiate the rest of the programme. This multi-activity programme provided the opportunity for the group to engage in activities at a low skill level, enabling them all to visibly achieve and have fun from the outset. Fun and success is crucial in establishing a viable and effective group. Any learning and development should, I believe, be perceived as an almost accidental by product in these early days.

As the facilitator, my agenda of goal setting was brought to the forefront at opportune moments and the group was introduced to the idea of goal setting and to the possibilities of negotiating their aims and learning outcomes. If these aspects are raised in a non-threatening, supportive environment in which the approach is democratic and non-directive, the group is much more ready to engage in collaborating in their own learning.

Whilst climbing the young women necessarily were initially dependant on my ability in setting up a safe climb, and relied upon each other when they were involved with belaying. After such experiences, it seems that young women embrace a newfound comradeship based on trust and shared experience. It is these types of situations that can be optimised by a sensitive, aware facilitator to enable young women to positively re-evaluate themselves.

Demonstrating Change

Positive changes within individuals is difficult to quantify and consequently claims that this has occurred are frequently questioned by those unfamiliar with qualitative research and its methods of demonstrating credibility (see Humberstone 1997). Such unwanted behaviours such as re-offending or continued non-attendance at school can

be quantifiable and so instantly recognised, and clearly pointed out. Personal development, increased self-esteem and assertion are all qualities that may go unnoticed and are ignored. Consequently, in order to recognise the benefits gained through

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these programmes and the personal and social developments in the young women, goal setting, monitoring and evaluation are essential. As was noted earlier, levels of skill and improved confidence in specific activities may be more easily recognisable and assessed. What should also be emphasised are the unseen changes that go hand in hand with these more visible achievements. For example, young women succeeding in climbing a rock face (if this was their aim) appear to gain increased feelings of self worth and confidence. There is some suggestion that this increased self-esteem may then be transferred to other area of their lives. In my experience, young women tend to be more supportive and less critical of each other in outdoor education situations and such relationships are issues that importantly can be promoted and reflected upon during the evaluation process. Feeling safe in women- only situations, young women may be more able to express emotions that they might hide in a mixed sex group. This is exemplified in a scenario that occurred in a caving event that I led. One young woman became very anxious and began crying whilst moving

through a tunnel. Most of the rest of the group shared her anxiety but through mutual support and encouragement they were able to turn the experience into something positive that enabled them all to feel a sense of achievement. They later went on to do more caving. I have noticed in mixed groups, young men faced with young women's emotional expression are almost embarrassed, perhaps they are afraid that their own fear will become visible and made fun off because conventionally 'Boy's Don't Cry' (Askew and Ross 1988). It is worth mentioning that such situations can provide considerable opportunities for work with young men in enabling them to deal with and express their emotions in non-stereotypical ways (Humberstone 1990).

It is crucial that personal and social development in the young women is monitored and evaluated. As I have indicated previously this can best be achieved by negotiating the aims and learning outcomes with the young women. Although the long term aim of this type of work is to enable the young women to deal with negative aspects in their every day life, such negotiated aims as, 'I want to be able to stand up to bullies

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at school', or 'I want to stop sniffing gas', are too great to be consider initially. Rather, goals such as, 'I want to try something new' or 'I want to complete this activity' can almost certainly ensure that the young women experience success. Once success has been achieved then the aims can be renegotiated and developed and, feeling more empowered, the young women may ultimately be able to make significant life changing choices.

Conclusion

Clearly, outdoor education is an important and beneficial way of working with young women. Such experiences provide immense opportunities for personal development and positive outcomes that in many cases may better enable young women to deal with unhealthy and unsafe aspects of their life. The long-term affects of these experiences depend on the sensitivity and abilities of the leader in facilitating the experience. Recognition of the benefits of outdoor education may be achieved through careful monitoring and evaluation of the experience both in terms of long term outcome and through exploring the perspectives of the young women through interpretative, qualitative methodology (Clarke and Humberstone 1997).

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